

May 8, 2016
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WHEN THE BABY CRIES Psalm 127

Today New York City alone has over 70,000 elevators. It is estimated that the equivalent of the entire population of the planet rides on an Otis elevator or escalator every 3 days. But it was not always this way. Elisha Otis did not actually event elevators. Elevators existed prior to him coming up with his invention, but they were little more than open platforms. If their cable broke people would be seriously injured or even killed so they were not considered trustworthy. Elisha Otis invented a braking system for elevators. He initially had trouble convincing people that his contraption was trustworthy, so in 1854 he came up with a creative sales pitch at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in Manhattan, which was sort of the World's Fair of its day. Every hour each day at the exposition he would step into his elevator then give an order for an assistant to cut the cable. The crowd would gasp, expecting to see a terrible accident, but the braking system would kick in and the elevator would safely stop. Otis would step out and announce, "All safe, gentlemen. All safe." At that exhibition he sold 3 elevators for \$300 apiece. And he never looked back. Today the Otis company has 63,000 employees and sales of over \$6 billion. There are Otis elevators in the Empire State Building, The Burj Khalifa, the Eiffel Tower, the Hotel Del, and far and away my least favorite, the Disney Tower of Terror rides.

Otis knew that his braking system was absolutely trustworthy, so he was willing to put his own life on the line. He demonstrated complete faith in his system by entrusting himself to it. Today we are going to think about something that is completely worthy of our trust, and we will see it in Psalm 127.

THIS PSALM HAS ONE MAIN LESSON

The theme of the Psalm is that if God is not in a project, in the end it will prove to be futile. Notice the repeated use of the word "vain." It appears three times in the first two verses of this Psalm. It means empty, futile, or pointless. The psalmist claims that all human activity apart from God will end up being exactly as MacBeth described life: "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Notice that the song is titled a song of ascents of Solomon. There is some debate about whether this was really written by Solomon, but it certainly fits. One of the themes of the book of Ecclesiastes is that all human attempts to try to find some

sense of meaning and peace through pleasure, achievement, learning, power and money are futile. It all ends up being vain. This Psalm affirms that all such efforts apart from God will indeed end up being empty and futile.

The psalmist gives us 4 pictures of this futility. The first two are building a house and guarding the city. Obviously one builds a house to have a place to live and guards the city to keep it safe. According to this Psalm if God is not in those projects they will both prove futile. They will not accomplish their intended goals. Our federal government is like a walking advertisement for this truth. Under President Obama the federal government has spent over \$1 trillion on education. So the schools have shown dramatic improvement, right? Wrong. Then there's the War on Poverty. That started in 1964 and continues to this day. In that time taxpayers have spent \$22 trillion. What has been the result? We've lost the war. There are now 50 million people living below the poverty line in the US.

We also have an unfortunate illustration of watching the city in vain. Our government had CIA, the Defense intelligence agency, the FBI and the NSA among others, all watching to guard our nation. They did so in vain in 2001. No doubt they did their best, but they were completely unable to anticipate and prevent a terrorist attack that cost the lives of 3000 people. I'm not saying that God has nothing to do with our government and its programs. My point is that you can gather some of the brightest people in the world and give them nearly unlimited funds to attack a problem and if forever reason whatever what they are doing is not in God's will it will end up futile.

Verse 2 says it is pointless to get up early in the morning and work until late at night wearing yourself to the bone in an effort to get ahead in this world. Our version translates verse 2 "for he grants sleep to those he loves." Another translation is, "he gives to those he loves while they sleep." The Hebrew could be taken either way. However the context favors the latter. The point is not that God enables people to sleep, but that if he is in their work he will provide for them what they need even while they sleep. This is like the message of the Sabbath. It is not hard to imagine an ancient Jewish person seeing Gentiles in the community working hard to bring in the harvest on the Sabbath while the Jewish man does nothing because he's been told to keep the Sabbath day holy. The message was God will make what you bring in six days a week be all you need and you don't have to worry about what the other guy is doing on the Sabbath. The Gentile is laboring in vain.

That brings us to the last three verses of this Psalm, which at first glance seem to be on a completely different topic, the value of children. This tells us that children are a heritage from the Lord. I think a better translation of that might be an inheritance from the Lord. Some translations actually render that children are a gift from the Lord. The verses go on to tell us that anyone who has his quiver full, in other words has all the kids he wants, is truly blessed. It's a little hard to translate that last verse into our culture but the point of it is because children will be there to support him if he has a dispute with a neighbor, a man won't be on his own. This will lead to success in his dispute.

Children obviously are a great blessing in our culture. If you've ever known a couple who were unable to have children and wanted them, you will know what a grief that is. But in that culture children were even more important than ours. They were seen as evidence of God's blessing on a person. And they were an economic benefit as well as a social one.

Some scholars see these verses as being on a topic so totally different from the first two verses that they could not have been part of this Psalm originally. Somehow, somewhere along the way, someone put two different original compositions together. In other words they believe that this was not one Psalm, but 2 that somehow got stuck together. However that is a problematic theory for couple of reasons. One is that there's no evidence that this was ever considered to have been two separate Psalms. All the ancient manuscripts and commentaries have this as one psalm. The other problem is the theory assumes that whoever this editor was that stuck these two psalms together was an idiot and couldn't see that they were about different topics that had nothing to do with each other.

I think this was all one Psalm and it has one theme. These last verses are one more example of the same theme that we saw in the first two verses. The writer tells us what an incredible blessing it is for us to have children, but they are in fact, from the Lord. The emphasis is on the phrase "from the Lord." If the Lord is not in your attempts to produce children, and by extension, to raise them, your attempts will be useless. If God is not in that project it, too, will be futile.

THERE ARE SEVERAL IMPLICATIONS

We have a part to play in human events

I don't need to talk much about this because it's obvious. Unless the Lord builds the house the builders labor in vain. That doesn't mean that the builders don't build. When Laurie and I bought our home now many years ago, our neighborhood was brand new. It was less than half completed. We used to like to walk up to the

area where they were building new homes and go through those partially built houses. I can tell you that there were actual human beings building those houses during the days. The builders didn't assume God would build the houses and sit around waiting for him to do it. When we went through the shells of the houses we didn't see the progress that had been made and say, "this is a miracle. Look at the changes that have appeared out of nowhere. God has been at work here." No, we would say, "Look what the plumbers have put in" or "Hey, the electricians have been here."

The fact that God can give to those whom he loves even while they sleep does not mean that the plan for us is just to sleep our lives away while God provides for us. I wish that's how it worked. Wouldn't that be great? "Hey, we need money for the mortgage payment. Guess we'd better go to bed and get a good night of sleep so God can give it to us." That would be nice, but that's not how it works. We have a role to play.

God is active in human events.

This is where we part company with the world around us. Our culture believes that all that is happening in this world is human activity. Those builders who are building the houses are the only ones at work. Those guarding the city are the only ones keeping that city safe. This Psalm asserts that God is active in our world. It claims that in some way that we can't perceive he is directly influencing what happens. He is active in the building, guarding, providing and bearing children.

Jesus talked quite a bit about prayer. The New Testament commands us to pray without ceasing, so prayer is a big priority in the Bible. But if God is not active in this world what is the point of praying about things? Recently the National Football League had its 2016 player draft. Laurie can testify that for three months leading up to that draft I communicated with my son Toby quite a bit about the draft. We would discuss players, possible moves and trades the Chargers could make, and incessantly made our recommendations for the Chargers picks. But you and I both know that all of our discussions about the draft were pointless. They affected nothing. No matter how much Toby could lay out for me the ideal plan for the draft and give an airtight argument for why it would be the best, there's not a thing I could do about it. I had zero ability to influence what the Chargers did in that draft.

Is that what prayer is like? Are we talking to someone who has no ability to intervene in this world so that it really is pointless to talk to him about the requests that we give him? Toby and I talk about the draft because we were interested in it and

it helps us process our frustrations with the Chargers and their frequently mystifying draft picks. Is that all prayer is? Are we just getting some things off our chest and trying to make ourselves feel better about it, all the while knowing that our prayers will not make any difference at all?

Philippians 4 commands us to pray about everything. Pray about all that is happening in your life. Praying about something only makes sense if God can actually do something about it. This passage claims that God is involved in the events of this world. It tells us that God actually can influence whether the house ends up being a fruitful project, the city remained safe, his loved one has enough food to eat and whether we are able to have children.

James 5:16 says, “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” James uses as an example the prophet Elijah whose prayers actually influenced weather patterns in ancient Israel. But Elijah was an unusual case wasn’t he? After all, he was a prophet. Yes, he was a prophet and he was an unusual case. But let’s remember that James is telling us that despite all that he is an example for all of us. I don’t think his point is that God will necessarily answer our prayers to break the drought in California and bring the rain we need, but that prayer makes sense because God does work in our world and influence how things go.

God determines the outcome

This Psalm astounds us by not just asserting that God is active here, but goes even further and asserts that God in fact plays *the* decisive role in the events that happen in this world. This is a message that we see throughout the Scriptures. Proverbs 21:31 says, “the horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.” Prepare the Army, get your equipment ready, prepare your horses for battle, stock up on ammo, make a good plan of battle, by all means keep your powder dry because you have a role to play, but it is God who determines how that battle turns out. Do the best you know how to do, be as diligent as you can be, but always know that the outcome is not up to you, ultimately it is up to God.

There actually are a number of battles in history that demonstrate this. The one that always comes to my mind is the battle of Midway. If you have never read about that battle you should do so sometime. A mere six months after the disaster of Pearl Harbor the Japanese sent their Navy to take the island of Midway. If they were able to capture the island it would have given them a base of operations which would’ve put the entire Hawaiian island chain in grave jeopardy. Our Navy’s plan of attack completely fell apart, yet in the space of 5 minutes American planes destroyed 3 Japanese aircraft carriers. Those dramatic, nearly miraculous 5 minutes

proved to be the turning point of the war in the Pacific. Everything went wrong, except for the fact that they won the battle. Read about the Revolutionary War some time. How is it that the colonies lost the large majority of the battles, often badly, but won the war?

Was that God at work? We can't say for sure. But those were almost miraculous victories. But I can tell you one victory that was one that was unquestionably God at work. Jesus the Messiah came to his people and was rejected by the leaders of the nation. They tried to destroy him. They did everything they could. And the result was they accomplished exactly what God had decided needed to happen. Jesus Christ died on a cross for our sins, and then was raised from the dead. Proverbs 16:9 says, in their hearts humans "plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." In that same chapter verse 1 says, "to humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes proper answer of the tongue." God is the one who decides how things will turn out. Proverbs 16:33 says, "the lot is cast into the lap, but it's every decision is from the Lord." We roll the dice, but God decides how it all comes out.

Daniel 4 tells the story of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. He was the ruler of the world's great superpower of that day, the most powerful man on earth. He was proud of his power and thought no one could stand against him. But God taught him a lesson. God taught him that there is one ruler of all when Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind. When he finally came to his senses according to Daniel 4:34-35 he said of God, "his dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'what have you done?'" God decides the outcome.

Recently Laurie and I have done quite a bit of babysitting for our first grandchild, the beautiful and wonderful Ella. As I was holding her one day I found myself just marveling at her. What an amazing being this child is. We can see her developing and progressing week by week. But as I held that precious child I began to think about what lies ahead for her. She has unlimited potential at this point in her life. Who knows what she can become. She could be almost anything as she grows up. But it occurred to me that there is a lot ahead of her that is not fun. There will be some illnesses, some disappointments, some hurts inflicted by other cruel children as happens with all of us. There will be the travails of junior high and high school and so many other obstacles. I found in myself this huge desire to want to protect her from all of those hurts, and to help her get over the obstacles and become the

godly woman we hope that she will be someday. But there is one thing I am very much aware of even more than I was with my own children. I do not control the outcome of her life. I am not going to be around most likely for her adult years. Holding that little child is a poignant and powerful reminder that while I have great hopes, great dreams and great desires for her, all of that is out of my control. Her mom and dad will have a lot of influence on how things go in her life and that gives me great comfort because I have enormous confidence in them. But they don't control the outcome. They can do their best and give her a terrific foundation in which to launch her life, but in the end only God controls how that will turn out.

That is the core of the message of this Psalm. Yes we control many things and we can do many things in this world. But we don't know how it will turn out. We don't control that. God is the one who determines the steps. God is the one controls whether the house is built in vain or becomes what it was planned to be, whether the city is safe, whether the children are born at all and whether they turn out to be all we hope for.

APPLICATION

ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED FOR GOD

In Exodus 32 we are told the well-known story of the golden calf. The people of Israel got tired of waiting for Moses when he was up on Mt. Sinai so they made an idol to worship. Chapter 33 relates some of the aftermath of that incident. God told Moses he would no longer go with the people of Israel because they were so proud and rebellious. If he did he would have to destroy them. But in verses 15-16 Moses said, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

How was Moses going to be successful as a leader and how were the people of Israel going to be successful as a people if God did not go with them? The answer was they weren't. Moses was acknowledging that his only hope was if God went with them. His only hope for being a leader was if God was with him. He understood that unless the Lord builds the house those who build labor in vain.

Being a pastor that has been a truth that I have been painfully aware of all my adult life. I am supposed to try to bring God's Word to people in a way that inspires, encourages and challenges them. I am supposed to help people experience God's grace and learn to live in awe of God. Here is the truth about that: I can't do it. I don't have what it takes.

I see my shortcomings as a leader and am appalled. Looking back over the past 36+ years I can see mistakes that I made and just shake my head in dismay. A friend asked me not long ago if after all these years in ministry I am going back and using sermons I preached in the past. I told him I don't do that. There are a couple of good reasons why not, but one of them is when I go back and look at previous sermons, even ones I recall as being pretty good, almost always I think, "Hmm, that wasn't very good."

I feel very much like the disciples felt the day they were confronted with a crowd of thousands of people out in a fairly desolate area and everyone was getting hungry. They suggested to Jesus that he send everybody away before the hungry masses got ugly. Jesus said to them, "you give them something to eat." Oh yeah that's a great idea. Why didn't we think of that? Maybe because we don't have even a little bit of food? How are we supposed to feed these people? Colonel Sanders wouldn't be able to feed a crowd this large. Do you have any idea how far it is to the nearest Chick Fil-A? Jesus asked them to do something that they had no way of accomplishing. I feel like I've been there all my adult life.

I feel like Jesus has handed me an impossible task. That day Jesus confronted the disciples with the reality that they didn't have what it took. Their only hope was if Jesus made the pittance they managed to come up with be enough. It wasn't what they could do that would solve the problem, it was what Jesus provided. And that's where I live every day of my life and ministry.

You might say, "well yeah but that's ministry. I'm not involved in ministry so I don't have to worry about that." Well, the bad news is yeah you do. This Psalm says the same principle applies to every project you undertake. I discovered that I faced the same problem in being a parent. I didn't have what it took to do the job.

My kids are all grown now and I'm quite proud of them. They are enjoyable, quality, successful people. So you might think that I obviously had it all together as a dad. You'd be wrong. I was recently reminded of the sense of inadequacy that I had the entire time we were raising our children. The occasion was my first time soloing with our granddaughter Ella. Laurie had an appointment at the eye doctor so it was up to me to take care of Ella all by myself. Unfortunately the timing was a little off and so Laurie had to hurry to her appointment. She basically handed me the baby and told me to feed her and change her diaper and she left. Giving her the bottle went just fine but then was time to change the diaper. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've changed a diaper? It was time for prayer. I prayed for

a non-poopy diaper. Hallelujah, my prayer was answered! However, I discovered that today's diapers are different than the ones our kids wore. It looked different. I thought, "how does this work?" It seemed more complicated than the ones we used to use. Fortunately I was able to figure it out and as far as I could tell got it on her correctly. So far so good. Ah, not quite so fast there Myatt. Very quickly Ella began to get unhappy. I tried entertaining her and distracting her the best I could with only moderate success. It wasn't long before she was more than just unhappy. She was crying in full voice. And I had no idea what to do. And I was flying solo with no rescue in sight. Do you know what a helpless feeling that is? Had I put the diaper on wrong and was it causing her pain? I didn't think she was hungry because she ate plenty. She wasn't supposed to be tired because she had just had a nap a little bit before I took charge of her. I had no idea what to do. And I remembered feeling like that pretty much the entire time from when our kids were born until they went off to college, and even after. As a parent I felt like I spent the entire time stumbling around in the dark, right on the edge of total disaster.

I was and am still to this day very much aware that unless the Lord parents the child, the parents labor in vain. I am thrilled and proud of the people that our children are today. And I can assure you it is by the grace of God. Yes, looking back on it we did a lot of things right. But I also see that things had to happen in their lives that only happened because God worked. It was ultimately by the grace of God that they are the terrific people they are today.

Years ago Laurie and I first started a church here we quickly became aware of the fact that this is a very expensive area in which to live. It wasn't long before we figured out that there was a very real chance our ability to last in ministry in this area would be limited by our lack of funds. Early on we told the Lord that we were willing to stay here as long as he wanted us here but he was going to have to make it possible because we didn't see how was going to happen financially. We were acutely aware of our need for God to work in our situation. We had no other plan. It has been nearly 37 years of God's abundant provision that is enabled us to survive here. We had no plan for how we were going to get our kids through college. We did our best, but it would not have been anywhere near enough. God provided in ways that cause me to marvel. Once again we have seen that unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain. But if God is involved in the project nothing can stop it.

Those are just a few examples I could think of in my own life where I have been acutely aware of my need for God to go with me. The truth is that our greatest need in every endeavor that we undertake is to have God work. We should always be

aware and acknowledge to ourselves and others in everything that our greatest need is for God to work.

LIVE LIFE HIS WAY

Even as we admit that we are dependent upon God for our endeavors to reach their desired goals, there is a potential pitfall. It is terribly easy for us to decide what we're going to do and how we're going to do it and then to ask God to work in it. We want God to bless our plans.

One of the traits of human nature is that we have a persistent tendency to have our own plans and want God to abide by them. Jonah had a problem with this. God wanted him to preach to the people of Nineveh, but he wanted none of it. He had a plan for the people of Nineveh. That plan was that they would continue to be a scourge on the face of the earth to the point where God would wipe them out. He saw them as a threat to Israel, his nation, and he wanted them dealt with. He didn't want any part of them repenting and God accepting their repentance. So he booked himself on the first Mediterranean cruise ship headed west and discovered to his dismay that his three-hour tour had become a nightmare. The weather started getting rough the tiny ship was tossed, if not for the courage of the fearless crew the Minnow would be lost. Er, the cruise ship. Jonah's problem was that he wanted God to do things his way.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Those are familiar words for many of us, but they're a lot easier to say than to do. What does it mean to trust in the Lord with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding? The Proverbs tells us. It means submit to him. It means do it his way, not yours.

The way to trust in the Lord and not lean on our own understanding is to make it our goal to obey God and be faithful to him above all else. I can think about the three examples from my own life that I cited. I had desires in all of those areas. In being a parent, being a pastor, and in our finances there were things that I desired to happen. I wanted my children to grow up safe and strong, to become people, well, much like what they actually are. I wanted my ministry to be strong and full of God's grace, and I wanted us to survive financially. Those desires are just fine, but they were nothing more than my personal desires. For me to trust the Lord with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding what I had to do was say what I want most of all in all of those areas is to do what God wants me to do. It is to do the will of God, to obey him, and to the best of my ability to be faithful. I needed

to focus on being a parent the way God wanted me to, be a pastor that God called me to be to the best of my ability, to be faithful with our money and to trust him. I needed to accept whatever result he decided was necessary. That needs to be the focus. My goal is to be what God wants me to be and do what he tells me to do. If I do that then I am successful regardless of how it might turn out or what other people might think.

TRUST THE OUTCOME TO HIM

In order for us to be able to focus on being faithful to God and do his will in every situation we are going to have to be at peace with however it turns out. The only way that we can do that is if we are confident that as long as the Lord builds the house, the builders are not laboring in vain. In other words, we have to leave the outcome to him. We have to be confident, like Elisha Otis, that the braking system will work. We have to cut the cable and trust our lives to the system. Only in life the system is the goodness, love and sovereign will of God.

That can be really hard. All of my adult life I have wanted my ministry to be “successful,” whatever that means. I really wanted us to have enough money to survive here financially. But what I wanted most of all, was to be successful as a parent. But in order for me to be successful that meant I had to say to God your will be done, not mine.

So much of the stress and conflict that we experience in this world comes directly from having a death grip on the idea that we need to have a particular outcome in our endeavors. It is fine to have lofty goals and desires. But what is going to enable us to live in peace and joy is remembering that we are not God. We don’t know what is best, nor do we have the power to make the world bend to our will.

We control very little in this world. The longer I live the more I realize how little power I have over what happens in my life and the lives of those I love. But I also realize that our heavenly father who loves us more than we will ever comprehend is the one who determines the outcomes. And so, we can trust him to make it work out the way he thinks it should go, not the way we think it should go.

Former pastor and author John Piper says, “God can perform more good for those who trust in him while they sleep than they can perform with anxious labor for themselves while awake.” He goes on to say “the great test of faith is to believe that when we can see only a bleak outcome to some situation and no good coming of it, yet the sovereign God can and will bring out of nowhere a turn of events or attitudes that brings great blessing. And he can do it while we sleep.”

The message of this Psalm is the key to peace in this world in everything. I have seen Christian parents almost frantic in their efforts to control their children and the circumstances of their kids' lives because they so desperately want an outcome and think it is all up to them. This creates enormous pressure and fear. And if at any point it appears it is not turning out the way they envisioned they struggle with guilt or bitterness toward God. All of us long to be the best we can be, as parents, spouses, in our jobs, in all that we do. But we will never be perfect. There will be flaws in everything we are and do. What can put our hearts at ease and give us confidence is to submit to whatever God chooses the outcome to be, to believe that he is infinitely greater than our weaknesses and failings, and to know that in the end the outcome is up to him. Our peace and the true success of every endeavor depends upon God. It depends on believing that God is greater than both my ability and my lack of ability and then trusting in his goodness, love, grace and wisdom.